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## Response to Gert Biesta

### Andrew Stables

I would like to thank Gert Biesta for his generous and thoughtful review. While I would always caution against mistaking the author's intentions for the meaning of a text, I am impressed by how exactly Professor Biesta has captured my intentions in writing *Childhood and the Philosophy of Education* at many points in his review. Whatever can be made of the remarks that follow, we have certainly not approached the text with radically different assumptions.

The review raises a number of queries and concerns. Most of these are minor, and many can be responded to with a simple *mea culpa*. A few of these have a little substantive significance. I shall respond to these minor issues first, before addressing the one point on which I feel an argument needs to be constructed in response to the criticism in the review: this is the 'dualism issue', which Professor Biesta and I have, I think, approached from significantly different positions.

Regarding all these concerns, I am humbled by the description of the book as 'kaleidoscopic', because on one level it implies a broad sweep and ambition and on another, a light irony in the implicit realisation that a book of this length cannot adequately cover all the areas it delves into. Perhaps in this response I can begin to fill some of the holes left by such a whistlestop tour across a landscape that deserved greater savouring. The reviewer is very kind in praising me for having 'educational questions' in the front of my mind, questions of 'learning, upbringing and schooling'. Unfortunately, I feel this is a little over generous, for my intention was even broader and more diffuse than that: I was interested in what a view of 'living and learning as semiotic engagement' (Stables, 2005) might have to contribute to the history of conceptions of childhood. The downside of this, perhaps, is that the book does little more than speculate about what this might mean for educational policy and practice (the charge of political naivety at the end of the review is well made, in that sense); the upside is that I am interested in the genuinely philosophical questions raised by all this – hence my concern to devote a few sentences at the end of this response to the dualism issue rather than, say, the direct implications for schools and teachers. For what it's worth, I tend to view teachers as graduates who should be able to make up their own minds about how to run their schools; research informs qualitative professional decisions, whether by politicians or teachers, but cannot dictate them.

To get some of the minor matters out of the way as soon as possible... first, on *Child 1/2/3*. I am happy that this conceit has been found useful, as it is key to my overall argument. However, while *Child 1* certainly includes 'anyone with living parents', it is also intended to include anyone with forebears, or ancestors: i.e. everyone. I stress that this is not an age-related conception of childhood, and that traditional societies are very *Child 1* orientated. If this point is not clear from the book, I apologise. Secondly, I accept that the book is as much 'post-Aristotelian' as 'anti-Aristotelian' and do, in fact, spend much of an early chapter explaining how important Aristotle still is for us. However, I am not convinced by the comment that 'Aristotle may perhaps not have objected to' a semiotic perspective, as it seems an odd basis on which to conduct critique. While the subtitle may be overstating, the work is 'anti' Aristotle insofar as it draws a clear distinction between the Aristotelian view of

fulfilled individual as effective transactor of a predetermined social role and post Enlightenment views of the individual as characterised by either rational autonomy or experiential difference. (Note, for example, the radically changed perspectives on trade, the exchange of services and monetary value.) Schooling, in my view, is often rendered less effective by sticking too much to Aristotelian assumptions in a post-Aristotelian context. Thirdly, I agree with the querying of the emphasis on identity development. It is indeed the case that I wrote about education as identity development some years ago initially. My emphasis now is on teaching as a challenge to, or disruption of identity. This emphasis was intended to come through in the text, but I fear I relied too lazily on some older thoughts. The basic point holds: schooling/teaching/ education changes identities by challenging them, and could focus, therefore, on identity rather than impersonal ‘learning objectives’ – but this should not imply an essentialist or stable (nay, Aristotelian!) view of identity. It is indeed scary to think that bureaucrats could come up with objective measures of identity development.

I now move to the big issue: that of mind-body dualism, the specialness of the human, and the human-nonhuman divide. At first blush, this may not seem the ‘big issue’ for this book, which is concerned explicitly with the upbringing of human children. Nevertheless, the force of the argument is dependent on the position taken in relation to this. Biesta’s position is that ‘Pragmatism ...[holds that]...there is a qualitative difference between two forms of semiotic engagement, one...in terms of symbols and one in terms of signs’. Here, I think, Biesta is accepting as a premise something that I reject as a conclusion.

Of course, it is impossible to be completely non-dualist. By referring to body and mind at all, a certain schematic, or at least attributional dualism is already implied: some things are considered mental operations, some physical. My position is strongly anti-Cartesian in rejecting the idea that mind and body are different kinds of substance, yet not anti-Cartesian at all in accepting that my ‘I think’ is my primary source of validation of the claim that ‘I am’. However, I do hold that pragmatism does not necessarily imply the kind of dualism to which Biesta refers. Indeed, what was significant in Peirce’s later thinking was the emerging sense of the universe as a whole as evolving through semiosis; Dewey largely inherits this and applies it, *inter alia*, to issues of childhood and education. Neither Peirce nor Dewey, however, develops his own argument to the point of questioning the specialness of the human as symbol user. This questioning has begun to arise (though is not yet fully acknowledged even here) in later work on, for example, biosemiotics, building on Jacob van Uexküll’s conception of *Umwelt*, or signifying environment, whereby, for example, a blade of grass might be a snack for a cow but a pathway for an ant. (See, for example, Maran 2006.)

Taking this argument further (but without adopting an anti-realist position that denies any physical substratum), there can be no clear demarcation between sign and symbol because no sign simply represents something in the physical substrate without ‘symbolic’ value arising from its position in a sign-system. A materially real flag might say ‘nation’ to me; a materially real pile of twigs might say ‘home’ to some birds – or, indeed, who can say what to what? For this is the central point. As humans we can only know how we as interpreting humans make sense: we cannot know why we make such sense, how far our sense precisely coincides with that of others, exactly

what physical reality underlies our sense making, or what kinds of sense other sentient beings make.

We can, though, observe that a cat makes sense in a cat-like way. A cat recognises a mouse because it knows what mice do. It categorises (pun intended). It has a then-dimension to its thinking in the now just as we do, albeit it doesn't think as we do. An infant likewise responds to its signifying environment (including the *Innenwelt* of its own body) on the basis of assumptions (unworded, like the cat's); the problem, for the responsible human, of the infant and of the animal are closer than has commonly been acknowledged, and it seems to me that pragmatism leads to an acknowledgement of this, not its rejection. Granted, adult humans are socialised in a more sophisticated way than adult cats or baby humans into human society, and they use words a lot more, but while this signals a qualitative difference, it does not imply a clear qualitative break. Words are one aspect of human behaviour; inevitably we are relatively insensitive to the distinctive achievements of other species and are not primarily motivated towards their flourishing. Nevertheless, the humanist response, echoed by Biesta, is surely a circular one - that we are different because we recognise ourselves as different and superior because we recognise ourselves as superior – for recognition is not evidence of massive substantial, or even experiential difference. It is my view that phenomenal worlds overlap (see, for example, Stables, 2008), that this view has serious implications for our treatment of human children and non-human entities, and that the ethical consequences of this position, taking semiotics as a serious basis for both philosophical thought and social extrapolation, are significant. These consequences incorporate what we might do with children and schools, but as part of a yet bigger project.

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